



## Reply to Michael du Plessis: 'Fantasies of the Institution: The Films of Georges Franju and Ince's *Georges Franju*'<sup>1</sup>

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It's not unpleasant to get as much attention as is given to my 2005 monograph on Franju by Michael du Plessis in his review article, and du Plessis raises some important points about what he (misquoting p. 9 of my book) calls 'Franju's enigma' – the longstanding absence of any convincingly synthetic account of Franju's very mixed output in documentary, feature films, and films for television. The continuing ignorance Franju's films suffer as a result of hardly being commercially available (Criterion reissued *Les Yeux sans visage* (1960) in 2005 on a DVD along with *Le Sang des bêtes* (1948), long unviewable outside archives) is about to be decreased a little by a French DVD issue of *Judex* (1963), his remake of Feuillade's serial, along with *Nuits rouges* (1974), the cinema version of an eight-part serial shown on French TV. There is no sign, however, of a DVD issue of his first well-received feature *La Tête contre les murs* (1959), or of any more of his documentaries, particularly regrettable in the case of his stirring anti-war document *Hôtel des Invalides*, from 1951.

Du Plessis has understood the project of my book to be an investigation of 'the conjunction of practices and discourses that allowed Franju to emerge in a particular way in French cinema history' (96). As a summary, this is not unfair, but I don't actually use the vocabulary of 'practices and discourses' in the book, having opted for the plainer and less ambitious-sounding objective of 'opening up the Franju enigma'. So when du Plessis immediately goes on to remark that it is 'curious' that I neglect any discussion of Franju's

<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/duplessis.pdf>

work in television in 'the last decades of his life' (actually only between 1965 and 1978), it seems I have remissly omitted a vital part of the discursive field I have elected to work in. In fact, my non-consideration of Franju's three films for television, *La Ligne d'ombre*, *La Discorde* and *Le Dernier Mélodrame*, was due simply to the unlocatability of viewing copies. (I did manage to see *La Ligne d'ombre*, but no copies of *La Discorde* and *Le Dernier Mélodrame* were traceable in France, the UK, or Belgium (Brussels), the three places I was able to visit and work in, although critical material on *Le Dernier Mélodrame* I drew on to introduce Franju's avowed interest in melodrama went some way to rectifying my omission of that film. *Les Rideaux blancs*, a fourth Franco-German TV co-production du Plessis draws particular attention to, proved equally elusive, frustratingly in view of my interest in finding something out about the working relationship between Franju and Marguerite Duras, who seemingly encountered one another professionally more than once. Unavailable or impractically located viewing copies of films has been cited by other contributors to MUP's 'French Film Directors' series – Renate Günther on Duras, for example – as a reason for not attempting an exhaustive study, and I reluctantly had to follow suit.) It may be true that 'a consideration of the particular national qualities of television such as its construction of an imaginary national community would have illuminated Franju for an Anglophone readership' (du Plessis, 96), but whatever the interest of French television in some fields, it doesn't have an archive of quality drama to rival the back-catalogue that sustains academic studies of TV in Britain or the US: discursively speaking, France's 'imaginary national community' is much more likely to be constructed (apart from by means of a continuingly healthy literary and press culture) through news, current affairs, documentary and variety shows. Although the picture has shifted somewhat recently with the advent of multiple satellite and cable channels, traditionally, in France, 'quality' drama is screened in cinemas.

Du Plessis offers another over-extended interpretation of the ambitions of my book when he says 'Ince seems to promise that her analysis of Franju and his contexts will examine the dissemination of an aesthetic discourse about 'film poetry' (96). I promised no such thing, although I did situate some existing French criticism on Franju (such as Freddy Buache's from the 1950s) in such a discourse, accurately I think. Du Plessis's observation that my book doesn't 'deal extensively with surrealism' (95) is the one aspect of his review that has caused me to wish I had ordered material differently, by bringing the overall emphasis of my chapter on 'Franju's cinematic aesthetics' (where I compare surrealist moments from documentaries such as *En passant par la Lorraine* (1950) with existing work by Gérard Leblanc on Franju's use of the 'insolite', a surrealist aesthetic procedure) to an

earlier point in the book: I certainly did not, as du Plessis surmises, consider Surrealism late in the volume (it is in the third chapter of four) 'to minimise the impact such consideration would have on the development of [my] argument' (98). I agree with du Plessis's suggestion that cinematography might be 'the privileged vehicle of surrealist thought and surrealist creation' (96), and think I make Franju's (self)-association with surrealism very evident, but in my view, a project examining 'how exactly the term 'film poetry' came to occupy a key place in mid-twentieth century considerations of cinema', which du Plessis remarks would have made my book 'much more valuable' (97) oversteps what a monograph on a single director can practically aspire to. Franju is far from being the only French/European 'film poet', and recent research into Surrealism has started to stress that it occupied the territory of popular culture as much as it did the galleries and exhibition halls of the day, but the designation 'poet' was a much more casual one in the pre-semiotic mid-twentieth century, in an era when television, post-classical Hollywood and other audiovisual media had not yet comprehensively invaded the territory of international popular culture. It is a designation of which a genealogy would make absorbing reading.

Generally, du Plessis's criticisms of what my book has not achieved result from a projection of an Anglo-American cultural studies framework onto a set of discursive phenomena that could not easily be made to fit it, but on two particular points, he completely misconstrues both my appreciation of Franju and my argument. To take the first one first: Franju's work may constitute a 'troublesome aesthetic interzone' I have not satisfactorily accounted for (98), but I certainly don't prefer 'realism' to this. Nowhere do I suggest (as he claims on pp. 98-99) that Franju was committed to 'reality', a term I deliberately eschew in favour of 'the real', which may be an awkward translation of the French 'le réel', but which I opted for expressly in order to avoid the plodding binary opposition of 'realism' and 'fantasy' du Plessis worryingly reinstates. The many statements of Franju's about reality and fantasy I cite in which he distances himself from the *fantastique* by insisting that it is a documentarist's look upon the world that inspires him, are construed by du Plessis as 'fairly ambivalent' (98). Instead of offering any alternative reading of these extremely troublesome statements, du Plessis moves back towards the characterization of Franju as a director of the *fantastique* I opened up for consideration, not because it is entirely misplaced (and I state more than once that it has some validity), but because it does not constitute a sufficient account of the *totality* of Franju's output. Du Plessis is right to suspect that I 'underplay[ed] the significance of Surrealism in order to distinguish and differentiate [my] work from previous studies of Franju, such as Durgnat's or Vialle's' (99), and pertinently associates Franju's style of surrealism with Bataille and

Caillois rather than Breton (a task already – and far better – undertaken by Adam Lowenstein in work on shock horror), but makes what I think is a misleading link between my underemphasis on surrealism and my deliberate loosening-up of the category of the *fantastique*. He complains that I don't explain 'how a genre category can come to be 'essentialist' (99): I would say, when a director is so closely associated with it that it skews perceptions of his output by implying everything he has done can be so labelled. It is obvious that the *fantastique*, because of its heritage in pan-European Romantic literature, 'troubles national narratives of cinema' (on p. 100 du Plessis finds this 'fascinating', a discovery): it started out in cinema in German expressionism, pops up in France in just a few noted films and arguably in a diffuse aesthetic influence, but enjoyed an extended mid-twentieth century life in Italy, and to a lesser and more exploitation-oriented degree in Spain. (This ignorance of the transnationalism of the *fantastique* is also revealed earlier on in Du Plessis's review when he complains that I do not deal with the 'particular nationalism' (?) of the *cinéfantastique*.)

The second of my arguments du Plessis has misunderstood, also from Chapter 2 of the book, concerns genre. My chapter ends with a reminder of the unstable relationship Franju's films entertain with genres such as the *polar*, *film noir*, and melodrama: how, then, does du Plessis conclude that I have 'stabilise[d] Franju's work in relation to critically more accepted and canonised genres' (p.100). Du Plessis has misconstrued my attempt to loosen up and translate the *fantastique* for an Anglophone readership as a 'replace[ment]' of it by *film noir* and melodrama, when the title of the section in which I detail *noir* and melodramatic elements specifies that these are 'other echoes' (*Georges Franju* p.66). The New Wave, to which I was almost obliged to refer because of the almost exact overlap between its principal years (1959-1964) and the release dates of Franju's first five features, has been used to support du Plessis's argument: Godard and Chabrol are certainly 'more canonised directors' (*ibid.*) than Franju is, but by comparing Franju's first four features to their New Wave productions, I was making a historical comparison between these directors' manipulation of genre(s), not trying to canonise Franju by upping his prestige. The New Wave directors, particularly Truffaut and Godard, were adept at winning prestige, but this attached more to their status as directors and critics than to their films themselves, which can hardly meaningfully be described as 'high cultural' products (there is at least a whiff of the ingrained Anglo-American tendency to regard all French cinema as 'high culture' here). My study of Franju may not have answered the question of how to situate his films on a high-to-low cultural spectrum, but I don't have the 'desire to legitimate Franju by linking his work to other 'higher' genres (oddly, *film noir* and melodrama)' du

Plessis attributes to me. (In this connection, incidentally, what sense does it make to refer to melodrama as a 'higher' genre?). From the mid-1960s onwards Franju was often dismissed as 'outmoded' and 'a fuddy-duddy who favored literary adaptations', as du Plessis notes (95), but I am not sure this was because he 'was part of a film establishment', a security that may well have eluded him altogether.

Perhaps it is because du Plessis is aware that I have written articles on Marguerite Duras that he reproaches me for not considering what common ground exists between Duras and Franju (which I would have loved to be able to do), but it is inconsistent to regret the lack of 'investigations of female insurrection' (101) and at the same time to suggest that my discussion of the representation of women, gender and the family in Franju's films is '[an] afterthought' just because it is the fourth of four chapters! Du Plessis does mention two interestingly gendered formal features I did not, both relating to voice-over (that a female voice frames a male one in *Blood of the Beasts* and that Franju employed Cocteau's lover Jean Marais as voice-over in the posthumously adapted *Thomas the Impostor*), but seems to have skipped a section of my book when he asks how Franju's 'thematics' of faciality might be 'specifically gendered' (101) – because one of the most important ways in which *Eyes without a Face* is distinguished from the host of (particularly Spanish) art horror movies it spawned is by the female agency that, in Franju's film, intervenes to stop the exploitative undercover trade in women's faces. This is a narrative, 'thematic' element, but because it is so clearly gendered, cannot be ignored in consideration of the cultural register of Franju's film and of his cinema as a whole – 'high'? 'low'? or an unresolvable mixture of the two?

I shall end by saying that I would be as pleased as many other Franju appreciators if my book turned out to have helped bring about a reissue of Raymond Durnat's 1967 book on Franju, which, although it only follows Franju's career up to 1965 (and therefore doesn't deal with his television work apart from *Les Rideaux blancs*) is full of fascinating insights, and possibly not as misplaced in its linkages of Franju to literature (not necessarily figured as a high art) and in its *auteurist* assumptions as du Plessis wants us to think. The desire behind my monograph was only ever to offer one set of answers to 'the Franju enigma', not its ultimate solution, and I certainly hope that the enigma of his cinema (possibly an over-provocative coinage on my part) will continue to provoke.

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